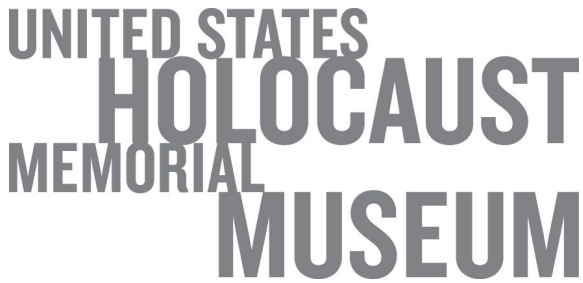

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THIS IS MY LIFE STORY AND THAT OF MY IMMEDIATE FAMILY DURING THE SHOAH YEARS OF 1941-1945

(F. Harry Schiller)

I described these events shortly after my return to Prague in June 1945 in Czech and translated and somewhat expanded these lines in 1991-1992 and finally transcribed in 1999.

The date of October 21,1941 will forever be etched in my memory. That day our family received the summons to appear at the Prague Convention Center on October 23rd, the birthday of my dear brother Gustav. The deportations of the Jews just started some 10 days earlier, two transports left before us and we were scheduled for the 3rd one. The destination was unknown as were most other details.

The summons advised us that we could bring along 50 kilos of luggage per person exclusive of food and bedding. Our father as always adhered strictly to the rule and made sure that we did not exceed the prescribed limit. We received tags which we attached to our luggage, father's No. was 111, mother's 112, Gustav's 113 and mine 114. We each had one large suitcase, one knapsack containing bedding and one hand luggage consisting of a small suitcase or large handbag with food.

During the night of the 22nd we said good-bye to all our relatives and friends and Mila's husband Thomas kept us company until 5 AM departure time for the Convention Center. Thomas was always most kind and fearless, the only Gentile relative we had. The packing was difficult, what to take and what to leave behind. We had no idea where we were going and what the needs might be. My dear mother cried bitterly while father was most somber, both realizing what might be ahead. My brother and I took it much more lightly, at time we almost considered it an adventure and Gustav even suggested taking along some weights in order to continue to exercise and built up his muscles. Needles to say, that was quickly dismissed by father who rightly valued the allowable weight of luggage for more important essentials.

We were forbidden to take along any jewelry or money but prior to departure mother had a dentist hollow one of her molars to hide a small diamond while father hid 300 German marks in my flashlight hoping that my age will protect me from being searched.

We arrived at the Convention Center by 6 AM and were allotted 4 mattresses on the floor . Here we were kept for 3 days, sleeping, sitting on the floor, having our hair closely cropped, bullied by the SS and slowly adjusting for

what lied ahead. Temporary latrines and the hundreds of people (actually each transport was 1000) sleeping and milling in one large hall, fed by a field kitchen were a depressing sight to say the least.

Father was kept busy filling out forms pertaining to valuables , property, furniture and everything else left behind for easy confiscation by the Nazi Authorities.

Finally on October 26th early in the morning we assembled in the courtyard in groups of 50 people. SS officer Fiedler inspected each group and arbitrarily decided to reduce the amount of luggage. He ordered each family to surrender 2 pieces of luggage. Father gave up his knapsack with bedding, shaving kit and other items as well as his bag of food sorely missed in later weeks. The large suitcases were handed over to be transported separately while we dragged our hand luggage along. We marched through deserted streets (closed temporarily to the local inhabitants) to the local train station. Each group of 50 people was allocated a passenger car and after awhile we settled down to our assigned spaces. Around 10 AM the train took off.

The train trip took two tiring days in locked passenger cars (later transportation took place in cattle cars only) without water or food. There were 1000 people of all ages, men, women, children. We tried to figure out where we were heading but the names of stations were unknown until we crossed Breslau confirming the rumors that the destination was somewhere in the East. The train finally stopped the second day at 5 PM. in the middle of some fields. It was getting dark and cold. The doors of the cars were opened and amidst screaming and shouting we were ordered to exit quickly. Some beating took place to get the passengers out faster. I was able to grab my knapsack and sleeping bag and soon saw strange men in red caps which we learned a bit later were Jewish police. The SS was barely visible supervising the action from a distance. We were lined up and ordered to march along a dirty muddy road. After a short time we came to a big gate and barbed wire fence enclosure with a watch tower manned by German soldiers with a machine gun. We passed the gate which closed behind us and that was the end of our freedom for the duration of the war for those who survived. (Out of 5 transports and a total of 5000 people only 257 came back alive).We marched another two hours in ever colder weather with snow slowly falling. The Jewish police was not helpful, on the contrary rather abusive trying to get this phase of their work finished as soon as possible. To aggravate matters further most of us could not understand Polish or Yiddish which they spoke.

Our spirits sank totally, we saw ourselves lost forever and the shock stayed with us. After walking through fields, small wooden shacks we finally reached our accommodations in the center of the city which we found out was Lodz, now called Litzmannstadt and our portion which was the Ghetto. A big building was to be the temporary home of our transport of 1000 people. Forty persons were assigned to each room and one person was made a leader. We were told to settle down on the floor and rest. After three days we were given some straw mattresses and also our luggage which we left on the train. All arrived in good order.There were not enough mattresses and some had to be shared by as many as 3-4 people. The room was a jumble of bodies sleeping over each other.

The building was located on Hanseaten Strasse. The Ghetto lacked a sewer system which was in place on two streets only and all dirt flowed in the street gutter. Most houses had only wooden latrines in the yards open to all sexes. Most houses had no running water, hand pumps in the yards and conditions were most primitive in spite of the city being the second biggest one in old Poland. None of us were used to these conditions and one could see how deeply this affected us all and particularly the older persons.

The Ghetto was comprised of several square kilometers. It was divided into three sections connected by tall bridges spanning key streets through which ran tramways connecting the Gentile sections of the City. These streets were segregated by barbed wire and there was no contact whatsoever between the Gentiles and the Jews except at the one gate (? Platz) through which food entered and manufactured product left the Ghetto. The entire sections were surrounded by barbed wire which you were not allowed to approach within 5 meters and guarded by old armed German soldiers.

At the time of our arrival the population of the Ghetto was some 200 thousand mostly from Lodz itself and its immediate surroundings. In addition to 5000 Prague Jews another 5000 arrived from Vienna and another 5000 from Germany , all in a span of a few weeks. (Some of our friends, such as the Koretz family arrived in subsequent Prague Transports.) Needless to say the Western Jews , immediately called derogatory "Yekes" were not welcomed by the local population. Their presence strained further already difficult conditions and diminishing resources. Their obvious wealth reflected in their clothing, (these transports being the first ones were composed largely from the wealthiest in order to give the Germans their homes, etc.) and different customs cause of envy. All inhabitants had to wear the yellow stars and were locally governed by the "Elder of the Ghetto" ex rabbi Chaim Rumkowski. Since no cars were allowed to be owned by the Ghetto population, he was driven around in a nice horse driven carriage and generally lived quite well , much to the dismay of the population.

Recently married to a lady 30 years younger he dispensed justice, rations and closely controlled ones life.

The Germans within the Ghetto were a few Gestapo personnel in a house specifically interested to ferret out jewelry, gold and foreign currencies out of the native population. Anybody suspected of hiding these items was hauled into their house and tortured and rarely came out alive. Occasionally one would encounter them on the street and except for the lack of the yellow star one could have mistaken them for Ghetto occupants with dire consequences. You had to step down from the sidewalk (existing only in the better part of the Ghetto) and take your cap off or you were badly beaten.

The Ghetto had of course bakeries, soup kitchens, different factories producing mainly clothing a furs for the military as well as metal pots and pans for the domestic population. Everybody was expected to work and the soup served at lunch was a good half of ones food ration. With this soup one starved slowly, without it death of starvation came quite rapidly.

Just about the time we arrived, the Ghetto Administration was introducing Ghetto Marks as the only valid currency. At that time food could still be bought on the Black Market. A 2 kg loaf of bread cost 6 Marks. Later on the prices rose steeply and money no longer bought anything while a top quality suit could barely be exchanged for a loaf of bread.

We continued to sleep on the floor for approx. 6 weeks after which we moved to a school building on Franziskanner Strasse. Here two story wooden bunks were set up with straw mattresses and some 60 people housed per classroom. There was very little ventilation and one or two weak electric bulbs for lighting. The human odors were strong but the room was warm in the very cold winter weather.

Initially we took some walks with father around the Ghetto with the highlight being our visit to the local big Jewish cemetery at Mareschin fairly far out of the city and yet within the Ghetto. Already then there were continuous funerals as people died ever so rapidly. There were some 150 funerals a day while snow was falling and dark gray sky covered the horizon. The dead were wrapped in a sheet, carried by two sticks tied together with a rope and dumped into prepared graves. No ceremony, few mourners since everybody was trying to save energy and did not go this far out of the city. Little did I know that twice more will I visit this sad place for the "funerals" of my dear father and mother. These cemetery scenes are for ever etched in my memory.

I started work in a leather factory sometime in November 1941. Every day at work I got a good soup which was welcomed addition to the ever decreasing meager rations. Initially our daily ration was 200 grams of bread and the 1/2 liter of watery soup with a few potatoes and vegetables. Thus the work soup initially was 1/3 of the daily ration, later close to one half. Once a month we got 100 grams of tough meat which we ground for a hamburger. We had to rent the meat grinder and the deal was that you were not allowed to take it apart after the grinding was finished and the renter collected the remnants. So we used a potato as a"flush" but even those remnants were a good reward to the owner of the grinder. In early 1942 and always in the winter rations became much smaller with fewer potatoes and vegetables which were the only supplement to the daily bread and soup. The meat rations was frequently skipped and we never saw butter, sugar, eggs or milk.

From time to time hospitals were emptied of patients who were shipped to unknown destination. There was no newspaper or radio and we were totally kept in dark with no news whatsoever. Prices for Black Market bread started to sky rocket. Soon a 2 kg loaf cost 100 German Marks. More and more people were dying of starvation and disease such as typhoid and diarrhea. It finally hit our room and diarrhea was moving from bunk to bunk. It hit us all but affected father most who already was weak having given us most of his rations. His diarrhea lasted 3 weeks and he lost over 30 kilos in weight. Mother's illness lasted two weeks with a loss of 20 kilos . I lost 8 kilos in 3 days and Gustav 3 kilos in 2 days. The outcome was disastrous. Few of us were strong enough to climb the steps to the second story where we lived. We were also barely able to climb the steps up the bridges separating the various parts of the Ghetto on the way to work. Going to the latrine was a major effort avoided as often as possible.

Finally in May 1942 we were assigned a room with bunk beds on Cranach Strasse 12. We shared this room with a German couple and a Viennese boy about my age with his mother.(His father died earlier). There were 8 of us in this room which was on a second story over a barn in the back of a relatively normal house. It must have been a storage building before the war as we found out later when it started to rain and cold weather set in. There was no insulation, gaps between the boards forming the walls allowed wind and rain to pass through almost as if you were in the open. The water bucket was frozen for weeks in the winter inside the room. The out house was in the garden for our premises as well as the front house. but often we used a bucket on the steps leading to the room. A hand pump on the grounds provided the water. We had a little stove for all of us but then there was not much to cook anyway. Being spring, rations improved a bit but starvation continued.

After one or two weeks the German gentlemen died of starvation leaving the grieving widow. A little later dear father took to bed and shortly thereafter died of starvation on June 1, 1942. The three of us, mother, Gustav and I walked behind the body bearers on the cemetery which we visited 6-7 months earlier. Nobody else came although we had two distant cousins and their families there from Prague. Everybody was saving their strength and did not go anywhere unless it was absolutely essential. Now the sun was out, the spring flowers were blooming but it could not cheer this sad place of tears and sorrow where more and more burials were taking place. From this day on we could observe our dear beautiful mother aging rapidly with hair turning white and the face rapidly wrinkling.

Our life or whatever of it was left continued. The summer ration was now up to 300 grams of meat per month, 8 kilos of bread, little margarine and some potatoes and vegetables. We were receiving some money from remaining relatives, particularly Thomas and Mila in Prague . A large sum of 5000 Czech crowns translated into 500 German Marks or 8-10 kilos of bread per month. We were allowed to send 2 postcards during the entire winter and the contents were carefully checked.

By now all three of us were working. My dear brother Gustav worked in an electrical concern while mother worked in a knitting factory. The soup at lunch kept us alive, the place of work was warm and without it we would have perished very quickly. Later in the summer the German lady moved out and now there were 5 of us left.

On the 3rd of September 1942 the Germans suddenly entered the Ghetto in force , emptied the hospitals once more and two days later issued a strict curfew , ordered registration of all children below the ages of 14 which was disobeyed and soon thereafter started a selection process from house to house and street to street. Eight Gestapo persons with the help of the Jewish Police lined up all inhabitants from several houses at a time out on the street in pairs . We were ordered to march in front of a German civilian dressed in a leather coat , boots and smoking a cigarette who waved each person to the right or left. Right meant deportation and death as we much later found out, left meant life fore the time being. I paired myself with the Viennese boy from our room who was smaller than me and was send to the right while I survived. Mother paired herself with his mother and also survived while the other lady who was more haggard also was send to the right. Now there were just the 3 of left in the room that a few months earlier housed 8 people.

The selection process and curfew (with no food and great danger when we fetched the water from the yard) lasted 8 days and some 20, 000 people were send to their death. Most families of our friends were torn apart and almost

everybody lost somebody. Our distant cousins Dr. Diamant and his wife lost their little daughter and their relatives Dr. Kohn, a well known eye surgeon went with his wife and children to their death. Dr. Diamant and his wife survived the war but these experiences destroyed their marriage.

But life still continued as did the never ceasing hunger . 50,000 more people were shipped into the Ghetto from the surrounding towns and villages. Sicknesses and death were ever present. In December of 1942 mother contracted typhus and Gustav and I were faced with a dilemma. Alone in the horrible room she could not survive and a stay in the hospital presented the danger of a sudden deportation. In the end we had to move mother to a hospital to get her some care and whatever minimal medication there was. We both went to visit her daily after work. We could not enter her room but could see her through the glass door and later at the window. It was a long and tiring walk in the darkness and snow but we never missed a day. Our room was lonely with just the two of us. But fate and luck was on our side and mother slowly improved and in February 1943 was discharged. An old lady barely able to walk, thin and fragile came out of the hospital. (She was 45 years of age). We brought her back to the room with the storm howling through the skimpy walls. We had very little wood to keep the stove going, made some tea and huddled in our sleeping bags.

Hunger forced our dear mother to go to work prematurely. The soup at lunch was essential for survival and the work place was heated. So within a short time mother walked to a factory that handled used clothing. Here ladies were tearing and manually shredding old clothing for recycling. I visited mother quite often or walked to work with her. The work was easy and people most pleasant. But the under nourishment, dirt and dust was a perfect environment for tuberculosis to which mother succumbed quite quickly. In May 1943 she started to cough, soon had high fever. Dear mother did not know the severity of her condition. She fought valiantly for survival, she wanted to return home to Prague, she hallucinated , tossed and turned in her bunk while my dear brother Gustav and I took turns taking care of her. She no longer could get up and walk to the bucket, we carried her there, more dead than alive. There was no room in the hospital for her but finally did gain admittance on June 1 and poor mother succumbed on June 3rd 1943. The funeral was no different from that of our father, this time only the two of us walked behind the bearers carrying her emaciated body wrapped in a sheet. The body was thrown into the grave and before it was covered with soil already another one was thrown into the next one, etc. Every few minutes another person was buried.

However a number was assigned to each grave but no name or sign. The sun was out once again, the cold horrible winter behind us, but the future more bleak than ever. We were now alone, two remaining survivors in the ghastly wind swept room of horrible memories.

Life had to continue and a greater burden fell on my shoulders. Gustav was weak and I had to find ways for us to survive. I found a valuable personal contact who helped me get a very desirable and much sought after job, that of a helper in the vegetable distribution center. Working there allowed me to eat whatever I found , mainly raw vegetable such as red beets, carrots and even an apple here and there. Only a bakery or a soup kitchen job would have been better but this was still a life saver. I was able to bring home a few potatoes and greatly supplement the meager ration of my dear brother.

I got the job through the daughter of Mr. Lustig? (who had a glove factory in our Prague building). She was a beautiful young lady engaged to the chief of the Jewish Ghetto Police. I still remember how I embarrassed them when I dropped in on them, I guess at a "delicate moment" to seek this help. She was laughing while he was eager for me to leave and promised me this job to get rid of me. Indeed a few days later I had it and I tried to reciprocate by giving them a beautiful new wallet of my father for which I doubt they had much use. Neither of them I believe survived the war.

Around the same time Mrs Martha Koretz who lived a few houses up the street invited my brother and me to share their small but warm, cozy room with them. She kept the whole family, husband and twins Peter and Kitty together carefully allocating the rations to the weakest of the moment. We knew the Koretz's very well, they rented the lower portion of our villa in Zelizy for a number of summers and in the winter we often visited them in their lovely riverbank three story private house in Prague.

We moved our few belongings which made the upcoming winter much more livable. My added food continued to help and at the beginning of 1944 we were surprised to receive two or three small shipments of bread from Mila in Prague. This was the first time that the Nazis allowed food packages to the occupants of the Ghetto. This happiness did not last long.

One day around February an edict was issued by the Ghetto Administration seeking laborers for an unknown place. Needless to say, there were few if any volunteers so registration of workers in food establishments was undertaken

with the intention of selecting those over 18. (Persons in these food places were in better physical condition than others). Since I was not of the required age yet, I registered at the proper place and was immediately put into detention, in spite of all objections. I was told that I will be shipped out once they had the required number of men.

My brother Gustav came daily to visit me and we talked through the fence trying to find a solution to our separation. There was no way for me to get out, Gustav could have easily volunteered to join me, but more and even better food packages started arriving making survival in Lodz Ghetto a bit easier. We therefore decided to separate, I felt that I could face the new challenge while Gustav would be better off in the known surroundings with expanded food supply. Some war news started to filter in and there was hope that the Russians might reach Lodz before too long. We celebrated my birthday through the fence with bread received from Prague and the next day my transport left and I never saw my dear brother again. (Lodz Ghetto was liquidated around July 1944 with everybody being shipped to Auschwitz. I was told in my research after the war by one or two survivors who knew him that dear Gustav perished on the death march towards the end of the war as so many others did.)

Over the years I have often reviewed this decision to determine whether it was a correct one. As my further narration will indicate, survival was not easy and only a few of us won the battle. Whether we could have kept each other alive or perished together we will never know.

Our transport from Lodz Ghetto in March 1944 consisted of 1500 men with an unknown destination. There were 60 of us in each cattle car, all luggage was turned over at the embarkation point. The rail car was sealed and there was very little ventilation. The train was moving all day and into the night. There were no toilet facilities and we relieved ourselves where ever we stood or sat. The train was put into a siding for the night and stood still while people were fighting for space and rapidly turning into animals. From the beginning already in the Ghetto detention I found two or three fellows from Prague, Hanus Orlicky-Adler, Alex Zemanek and Franta Beck with whom I shared closely the remaining 14 months of imprisonment and established a close friendship. I was particularly close to Hanus while Alex and Franta formed the second pair. Our pairs got separated in Buchenwald in January 1945 with Alex and Franta remaining there already somewhat under International supervision while Hanus and I were shipped further to more horrible experiences. (all four of us survived the war, Alex settled in the US around 1967 while Franta Beck lived in Teplice till his death in 1998).

We occupied and defended our corner in the cattle car which gave us some privacy, some security and perhaps even a little more room. We remained on the siding till early morning hours, the door never opened nor did we get any food or water. The train started again around 10 AM and after another day of travel we arrived at the final destination. The soldiers chased us out of the car and marched us under close supervision to a nearby camp. We were assigned to a barrack with bunks , two high and told to settle down. I quickly grabbed a corner upper bunk for Hanus and myself and awaited further developments.

Soon we were visited by "old" inhabitants of the camp and told that we were in Skarzysko-Kamiene in Central Poland. The camp had some 5000 prisoners, all Jewish and compared to the Ghetto from where we just came, was better fed and somewhat better set up. We were given a good, hot soup and allowed to rest peacefully that night. We found out that we were in Camp W A and that there was also a camp W B and W C. The C camp was the worst one, prisoners there were filling artillery shells and other munitions with explosives without any protective clothing and their skin within 3 months turned yellow from the sulfur and other chemicals and soon thereafter many died.

Inmates of Camp A and B worked in the local munitions factory making the casings filled by camp C. In total there were some 10,000 Jewish prisoners who worked next to some 15,000 local Poles who lived in nearby villages. Contact with the civilians allowed some illegal exchanges for far better deals than we could obtain in the Ghetto. Every piece of clothing was suddenly very valuable and gave us larger quantities of food. Unfortunately I did not get back my rucksack which I handed over at the embarkation point and thus had only limited amount of things to trade. Later I found it almost empty on a nearby bunk evidently stolen by a fellow prisoner from Lodz who got to the luggage faster than I did after we arrived. I sold my Longines watch and my fine jacket during the 4 months we were in this camp and shared my extra food with Hanus and others which they did likewise when their turn came to sell their belongings. They did get their luggage and had more to trade helping me out. We were also finally able to get some war news and were amazed to hear where fighting was taking place. None the less we were still ignorant about gassing of so many inmates in other camps but started to suspect something.

This camp was built in 1942 and there were still some of the original occupants . One couple was an Ing. Langer from Moravia with his wife who now had a fairly important administrative position. They took great interest in me and were immensely helpful in many ways. They gave me some food and for Hanus, restoring our health and strength. He was the only Czech in the camp.

There was also a Mr. B. (I no longer remember him) who helped me considerably with food and got me an easy job in the munitions factory. The job consisted of polishing chrome plated dies used for extrusion of bullet casings. These dies after a given number of extrusions had to be re chromed and again sandpaper polished to a very smooth surface. Mostly women did this work sitting down. The work was not difficult but each shift lasted 12 hours, seven days a week. Soon the summer came and with it frequent heat waves making life quite miserable. Inside the barracks it was oppressively hot while outside rather uncomfortable.

Once sleeping outside on a bench I had my cap stolen by a "pious" Jew who disregarded my sleepy request to pray at my feet rather than at my head. Once I fell asleep again he and my cap disappeared.

The heat brought on fleas and worse yet, many lice. There was no opportunity to wash or bath, periodically showers were arranged for large groups at a time but not too often. I got an infection on the palm of my left hand which swelled and had to be cut open. Of course there were no medicines or anesthesia but fortunately the wound healed in spite of the pain.

The camp was guarded by Ukrainian militiamen who made our life as miserable as possible. They would frequently search us and steal anything of value. I was relieved of my fountain pen, a leather wallet and 100 German marks which I had carefully stored away since our departure from Prague. All these items were intended for trade to get some more food and thus greatly missed. By June we were becoming aware that the Russian troops were advancing and the Germans started to plan an evacuation. Soon work ceased and we were told to start dismantling the factory and move the machinery to another location. Daily under ever more frantic and brutal supervision we had to disconnect the machinery and move it piece by piece on to waiting flat railcars. This was done with sheer physical force since no mechanized equipment was provided. Once a machine was unbolted from the factory floor, we had to lift it with crow bars, place 2" pipes underneath it and roll the machine slowly but securely to the rail lines and up a wooden ramp into the car. Pipes were placed in front of the rolling machinery, freed pipes from back brought to the front and care had to be taken not to allow the machine to roll off the pipes since lifting it up was a backbreaking job. Getting it up the wooden ramp was particularly tough and dangerous.

Some fellow inmates had their toes crushed by the pipes, others injured when the machine rolled back because none of us were very strong to always maintain the momentum esp. when a particularly heavy machine was being moved. Any injury meant death, there was no hospital, no medication and the Germans did not keep alive any non working Jews. As days and weeks went by and the front kept moving closer, the guards became more vicious to get the job done. Workers were being whipped and abused but I was fortunate to escape most of it by being smaller and leaning always at the greatest possible angle against machine thus pretending ever harder work.

The final evacuation took place on June 30, 1944 when all able bodies persons were loaded into open rail cars and transported to a new location. There were 110 persons in each car while all sick and disabled ones were shot and killed.

The train trip was relatively short and by nightfall we were at our new destination, Czestochowa. We were immediately put to work installing the machinery in a empty factory building. It was rainy and most of the barracks were not completed so we all got wet inside and outside. After a few days the roofs were on and we were able to settle in. Naturally some prisoners got pneumonia and soon died.

It took a month of hard work under brutal guards to get the machinery installed and put to use which made then our life a bit easier. However food was getting scarcer and worse, the guards more brutal as they started to realize that their war was being lost.

I succeeded several times to steal some potatoes and vegetables from nearby railcars and thus supplement our rations. This offense was punishable by severe beating had I been caught but I was fortunate to escape detection.

Work shifts were 12 hour days and we were rotated between day and night shifts. Unfortunately frequently where we were resting after an exhausting night shift we would be hustled out of the barracks to perform various chores, such as unloading food from rail cars, machinery parts, wood or coal for cooking, etc.. To escape this extra work I found a hiding place under the barrack, in the sand where I would bury myself and get the needed rest and peace. Sometimes we would crawl under the wires guarded by the Ukrainian soldiers and escape into the factory close by which was heated and there were nooks and crannies where one could hide and rest. Again all these "escapes" were severely punished if one was caught but with luck and help of ones friends we were fortunate enough never to get caught.

The four of us from Prague helped each other all the time and saved each other from many difficult problems. A Czech doctor in the first aid station who was in the camp already when we arrived provided further assistance.

We worked through the Christmas Holidays (1944) and I remember vividly the somber mood of the German supervisors and engineers who were there on the night shift. There was one guard who tried to be kinder then most. I do not remember any gifts of food but a smile or better yet, few if any harsh orders was a welcome respite in daily struggle to survive.

Once again the Russian troops were moving closer to our camp in Czestochowa and the Germans again were planning evacuation. This time events moved much faster than anticipated and on January 13, 1945 the fighting was within ear shot. The Germans rounded some 500 of us and we were put into freight rail cars rather rapidly and the train ordered to pull out. Some German and mainly Ukrainian soldiers tried to jump on to be evacuated but the SS guards threw them off, and shot at them to keep them at bay. Only part of the camp was thus evacuated, the rest were more fortunate to be shortly liberated by the advancing Russian Army. We were the unlucky ones once again being dragged to an unknown destination.

There were 60 of us in each unheated rail car, no food, no water and trying to survive in freezing weather of a harsh winter. Again we had to fight for every inch of space and once again Hanus and I secured our little corner. I was losing my spirits and determination but Hanus kept me going. The second day at a stop we got some water and bits of bread and after four days of slow travel we arrived at our destination. The train stopped on a field covered with snow and through the cracks of the wooden sides of the rail car we saw some people who told us we were at the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Soon we were gathered outside and marched off to the camp. Here we were registered, stripped completely and run through a steaming bath and head shave. While this was good health wise, I lost the few remaining possessions that I so carefully guarded all these years from Prague. All the documents, photos, pen , clothing which still reminded me of the happy days before deportation were now gone . We were issued concentration camp uniforms - stripped pajamas of thin cotton, wooden shoes and since the camp ran out of stripped cotton coats I was a given a civilian warmer 3/4 coat which had a piece of striped cloth sown into the sleeve to indicate my prison status. We were now in a true concentration camp compared to the Ghetto and work camps of the past. The clothing was totally inadequate for the freezing weather , the wooden shoes very uncomfortable and with no hair I felt the cold on my head as well.

Buchenwald at this time in spite of its horrible reputation was already somewhat under Red Cross supervision and thus a better camp. Old inmates told us that conditions in the past two months improved considerably. We were housed in a barrack, some 1000 of us sleeping in bunks 3 high. We got survival rations but every evening in bitter cold, wind and snow had to gather outside for a count down. Sometimes it took up to 2 hours to get the count straight and we all suffered greatly with our thin clothing, wooden sandals, no socks or underwear and the minimal nutrition.

After two or three days in Buchenwald we were once again ordered to march off to the railway line for further assignment. It was January 19th 1945 and we were on our way to the Concentration camp Dora in the Harz Mountains. The camp was bigger than Buchenwald since it supplied workers to the underground factories nearby manufacturing V 2 rockets.

Many of the inmates were French and we were told that thousands lost their lives when they were setting up the factories in previously empty caves. Once again we were stripped, showered and issued new clothing. I was fortunate to retain my coat, the rest was changed for the same thin stripped prisoner clothing. I did retain my spoon with my inmate number, everything else was already confiscated in Buchenwald. Neither camp tattooed ones number on the arm, Auschwitz was the only camp to do so.

Hanus and I were assigned to a Czech barrack mostly inhabited by older Czech gentile political prisoners. We were nicely received by them and relatively well fed. We were quite pleased by this favorable change but again this interlude did not last long. After three days we were once again transported further, this time to a small satellite camp of Rottleberode. Here were some 1500 inmates, mostly gentile political prisoners of various nationalities.

We were housed in an abandoned flour mill. The building was three stories high situated in the woods fairly far from the nearest village. The snow was deep, and it was very cold . Soon our new group was split into two parts. One half send to the caves to excavate more space for factory production while Hanus and I were in the second group assigned to provide firewood for the SS barrack and the kitchen. We felled some trees, cut them into logs and while this work was a bit easier and safer than working in the caves, it did mean being outside all day long in the cold winter weather.

At night we slept two to a bunk with no blankets or heating. We warmed each other by sleeping dressed and folded carefully into each other. As long as your back was warmed by your mate everything was reasonably satisfactory.

Of course the mate had his back exposed to the freezing temperature and soon asked to switch positions. Thus we would rotate many times during each night trying to get some rest.

It was here that I encountered a homosexual inmate . This individual was a German gentile Kapo which meant that he was a supervisor of inmates and had a greatly preferred position in the camp. As a homosexual he was identified by a black triangle, Jews I believe had a yellow triangle on their clothing, purple was political, etc. This Kapo who probably was an inmate for very long took a liking to me and gave me extra food which I shared with Hanus and was greatly welcomed. He continuously urged me to move to a separate bunker and to sleep alone. Naive as I was at the time, I did not quite understand his sexual preferences and continued to explain to him that I needed Hanus and vice versa to keep ourselves warm. Finally somebody delicately explained to me his sexual preferences and I tried to tell him that soon war will be over and he will has many women as he will desire. Little did I understand that women were of no interest to him. Shortly thereafter he stopped chasing me but we also lost the extra food supply.

This small diversion came to mind only after the war. Our thoughts at the time were only on food, work and survival. Daily we had to clean the building, then proceed into the woods in deep snow to cut trees, drag them in, cut them into logs and split them further into more usable pieces. The guards were constantly present, often impatient and sometimes quite brutal. We were wet all the time, the recently acquired socks and cloth tops of the wooden sandals were soaking wet and the only way we could dry them was to sleep on them and dry them with the heat of our bodies.

After approx. 14 days of this work we were assigned to the underground factory Tyra. The German civilians who picked us for different work selected me for an office job and I recommended Hanus promptly for a warehouse stocking position. Our German names , our background and education were helpful and I am sure the German civilians this late in the war were trying to provide themselves with some alibis. Thus we had very pleasant positions and heated surroundings. The SS who ran the camp and supervised the inmates were annoyed by our easy jobs particularly since we were Jewish and tried several times to have us reassigned. The German civilian in charge persisted in his selection claiming that my knowledge of several languages was of great help and essential for their work.

So here we were, deep in the Harz Mountains in relatively peaceful, warm surrounding. One of the office persons was an old Czech inmate, who before the war occupied a high position in one of the Czechoslovak Ministries and was a pleasant companion. (We met once or twice after the war in Prague).

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The work day was very long, we got up around 2 -3 A.M., were counted carefully in the yard, marched a good hour in the deep snow on a country road to the factory where work started at 5 A.M. After 12 hours we were assembled once again, counted and marched back to the flour mill, counted again , given some food and allowed to rest. All the marching was done in the dark, partially I am sure to avoid the Allied planes which dominated the skies over all of Germany. Very little activity took place outside, all working personnel was inside the caves well before the daylight. A railroad led into the main cave but all movements took place at night and the outside rails were well camouflaged. Of course with this schedule 7 days a week we never saw daylight.

Our work activity continued until April 4th, 1945 when production ceased. The civilians departed at that time and we spent the next two days doing some work in the caves. Then back at the mill we were divided into two groups. Our group was given a small loaf of bread and a can of meat per person. We were then loaded into open railcars for further transportation. We set in these open cars for 6 days frequently in cold rain and generally cold April weather. Finally an engine was procured and the train started to move. We had traveled barely 100 km when the train was attacked by Allied planes. The planes were machine gunning the entire train, causing it to stop and concentrating especially on the engine which they finally succeeded to destroy. It was only after a short while that I noticed standing solidly packed in the car that a Russian prisoner next to me collapsed. I saw that a bullet passed under my chin ripping my coat and hitting him in his head killing him instantly.

As soon as the train stopped we all jumped out of the wagons, rolled down the slope on which the tracks were and hid in a ditch. The raid stopped shortly thereafter and the SS guards corralled us again and marched us of to a station. Here we sat again for 4 days without food before the order was given to march . We walked all day dragging ourselves as well as we could on a road through some deep woods. The guards were continuously beating all laggards and shooting those who could not go further. I sprained my ankle when I jumped from the train and found the march ever more difficult and painful. But seeing the killings I forced myself to keep up with the help and encouragement of Hanus. Finally by late afternoon we came out of the wood to a small German village called Wiepke in east/central Germany.

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We saw smoke on the horizon and only later learned that it was the city of Calbe which was burning. We heard the artillery in the distance and knew that the end of the war was near. We were herded into a cattle pasture where we were allowed to rest. Suddenly we noticed that all the guards disappeared. Some prisoners started to escape to a nearby forest through the simple wooden enclosure. Hanus was urging me to go as well but with the painful ankle I was not too keen to move again. When he finally threatened to do so alone I consented but insisted that we go back to the deep woods through which we marched all day long. I saw too many fellow prisoners escaping to the nearby forest and was afraid that they might be gathered back by the guards should they reappear. We walked back about an hour , hid under some trees and fell asleep.

A few days later after we were liberated we learned that this decision indeed saved our lives and except for another person hidden at a farm (and three others met later) we were the only ones who survived the slaughter that followed. Photographs taken by the US Army showed the prisoners burned and machine gunned in a barn. It seems that during the time of escape the SS guards changed into civilian clothing with the front moving ever closer, then herded those who stayed in the pasture into the barn, swept through the nearby forest which turned out to be just a small clump of trees bringing those who were hidden there into the barn as well. They poured gasoline on the structure and set it on fire gunning down those who tried to escape. The slaughter in the vicinity of Gardelegen has been documented in films and other records.

The poor souls who lost their lives in the last days of the war were mainly political prisoners from all the occupied countries. Not many Jews were among them. I do not know what happened to these fanatical SS guards who continued to murder till the last day of the war with no regard for human beings whatsoever. The second half of the prisoners of the concentration camp at Rotleberoden fared much better. They all survived and were liberated after their shorter and more peaceful evacuation.

While all this was going on Hanus and I slept on the ground in the forest. In the morning we looked around and found a few German Air Force uniforms evidently abandoned by other soldiers who put on civilian clothing. We changed into them, as ill fitting as they may have been but better then the visible stripped prison clothing we were in. We put the caps on our shaven heads and ate a tube of toothpaste which we found among the clothing and weapons. We then walked out of the forest in another direction towards a village in a distance.

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We were now 8 days without food except for the piece of bread and can of meat we got at the start and finished soon thereafter and the toothpaste and some bark eaten recently. We decided to go to a farm, pretend to be Sudeten German teenagers in case of questionable accent and ask for some food. I was to be the spokesman since by German was quite respectable.

We arrived at the first house and much to our surprise were welcomed with open arms. We were given platters of food which we ate carefully in order not to create suspicion. We stayed a few short minutes so that we could not be scrutinized or questioned too much. We stopped at the next one and repeated this a few times satisfying our hunger. Everybody welcomed us warmly and we asked how to get back to German units and how to avoid the Americans. Our disheveled look was readily accepted as was our story that we got separated from our unit and were trying to find our way back.

We were told that in the center of the village there were two roads, one leading left where American units were to be encountered while heading right we might join up with the retreating German Army. The tough moment came shortly in the middle of the village with many farmers looking at us when we turned left. Some were shouting to us that we were going in the wrong direction but I kept telling them we shall make it and soon we were out in the open fields and shortly thereafter met the first American tank. I told them in my halting English who we were and in spite of our German uniforms were not doubted even for a moment. We were told to proceed further along the same road to a provincial town and report to a Displaced Persons camp for lodgings and food.

By now we were totally exhausted both physically and emotionally. It was a full day, my ankle was hurting and the last few kilometers Hanus had to support me but at last we were free. In one day we went from prison outfits to German Air Force uniforms, from a German village to US Army and now were free men once again after almost four years in concentration camps.

On the outskirts of the town of Kielce we were welcomed by French troops who gave us food again, at least a sixth meal in one day after so many days of total starvation. We were taken to an American major who registered us and send us to a small Polish DP camp. There we met four other escapees from our transport, the sad remnants of a starting group of 750-1000 people.

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We relaxed, changed clothing, filled ourselves with food which was freely available. After four years of starvation we could not believe that this could continue and we kept a can of peaches, some jam and bread by our bed to have it available whenever needed. After 4 days I went into town to obtain some documents from the local Military Government. During our conversation it became apparent that they were looking for interpreters and I got a job promptly. I insisted that my friend Hanus come along and he became the supervisor of the domestics used to cook and clean the requisitioned large villa. We were given a room with regular beds and furnishing and slowly returned to civilization. We could not adjust immediately to all this "luxury" but welcomed it immensely.

We assisted wherever we were needed. I interpreted the needs of other prisoners and slave laborers in surrounding camps and usually it was a request for food which was promptly granted. The officer in charge was Major Shapiro from New York (or Philadelphia) who would frequently summon local mayors from nearby villages and order them to fulfill the needs of these camps. Frequently threats had to be used to get the necessary action but ultimately all orders were obeyed. I translated from Polish into English back to German with a smattering of Russian. In spare time we scouted the villa for hidden treasurers of which there were none. We were mainly interested in food and surprisingly the sudden change in our diet resulted only in frequent diarrhea and nothing worse.

The Military Government Group moved once or twice and we with them. We became friendly with all the personnel but especially so with 1st Lt. Malcolm M. Armstrong with whom I corresponded later on from Prague, visited him in a little town of Keeseville, N.Y. where he was a forestry engineer after I came to US in March 1951. Malcolm remained a friend till he died in Jan. 1998. We exchanged letters periodically, he was a very intelligent, well educated man and dictated a few lines to me even on his deathbed. As fate would have it, I was able to repay somewhat his kindness to me in 1955 when I got his brother a job in Los Angeles and also met his mother a few times.

On May 26th this little Military Group[(some 6 people) received orders to transfer to the Pacific and our job came to an end. We got a nice letter of recommendation which came in handy during our long walk home . Hanus and I joined two other Czechs who were in Germany on forced labor and we requisitioned a small 4 wheel hand wagon into which we loaded our meager possessions and headed out towards the Czech border . There was no civilian transportation, no trains, buses or cars. There was no gasoline and the military was traveling from East to West while we were heading South.

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So here we were pushing and pulling our little wagon on an Autobahn encountering virtually no traffic all day long. In the evening we would look for the local US Military Government who assigned us accommodation and food thanks to the letter I carried. The Germans who were ordered to help us were most resentful but acquiesced. After three day our little wagon gave out and we asked the American officer in charge of the local village for another one. These wagons were the only means of transportation at the time and worth a fortune. It took a few soldiers with rifles to requisition one from a farmer who would have fought us but did not dare to oppose the soldiers. This wagon lasted for the remainder of the trip

We walked some 200 km from Halberstadt through Fisleben, Asherleben, Oscherleben to the town of Zwickau where we found buses from Czechoslovakia assisting in the repatriation of their citizens. We stayed here two days to await their return and then came back via Most to Karlovy Vary. Here we transferred to a train and came back to Prague.

We arrived in Prague on June 6, 1945 after almost 43 months of captivity, death and deprivation. We went straight to my cousin Mila's apartment. She and her children were at their summer home outside the city but the neighbors advised me that her husband Thomas was home. They offered us their apartment to await his arrival. He came shortly, took us immediately in and thus another chapter of our lives came to an end.

F. Harry Schiller

GARDELEGEN mid April 1945

The sad ending of fellow inmates - smoke is still visible when these photos were taken by US Army

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